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Sahitya Akademi

meet the author

Surendra Jha 'Suman'



*Ever-enduring Devotee, O Tree,
How you are engaged in penance
Ever since your birth ...
You've suffered the hot mid-day sun
Of long summers,
Arrow-sharp showers of rain
Did not bother you.
You withstood the powerful outbursts
Of thunderous clouds,
Nay, even their cruel admonitions
Through crooked lightning,
Nature made you a home of leaves
Bereft of roof and adornment.*

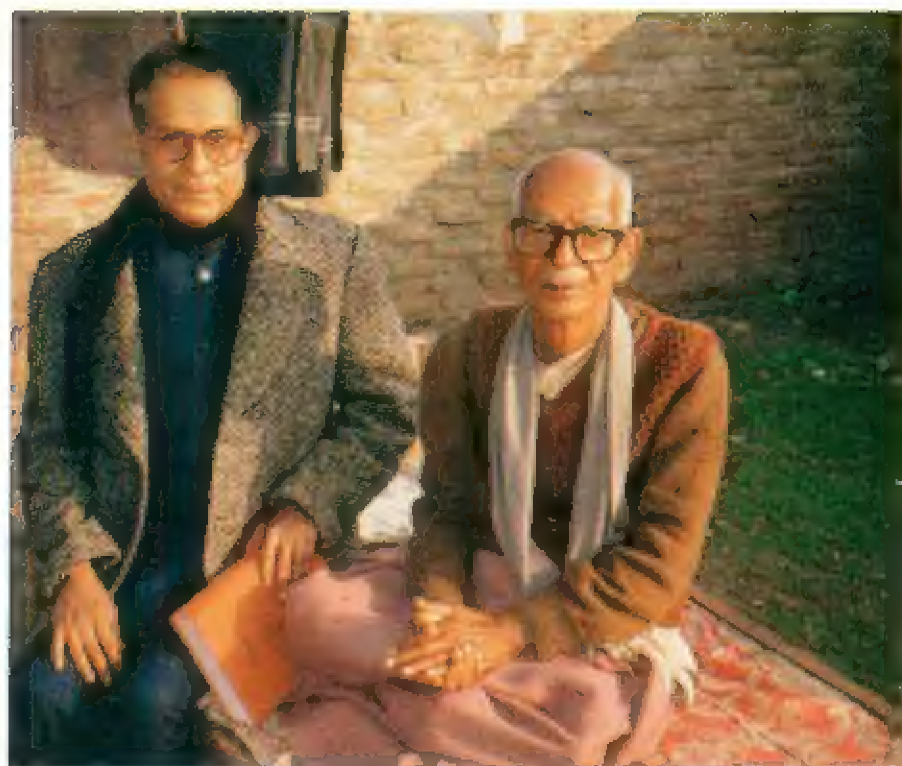
To the tree

The lines above sum up Surendra Jha 'Suman's personality as a poet. His poems depict his inner crisis and conflicts, the many knots of life that baffle our consciousness with the feel of 'a home of leaves'.

Born in 1910 at an obscure village in the old Darbhanga district of Bihar, Surendra Jha 'Suman' has had his education at numerous places ranging from Muzaffarpur to Varanasi and Koilakh to Calcutta. He not only topped the list in every academic examination he took, but absorbed, perhaps more deeply, the different places, more than most of his close-associates and contemporaries. Two streams run as undercurrents throughout his literary work. The stream of Sanskrit-based classical cultural heritage gives it such a rich and complex texture that the late Jayadeva Mishra rightly called him "the poets' poet". The other stream, that of literary journalism, which earned him the nickname 'Sampadakji', made him write novels and short stories like 'Brihaspatik Shesha'; he is acknowledged by all as the father of Maithili journalism. It also brought him into active politics.

As an editor, he began with *Triveni*, a handwritten literary magazine, at a very early age. When he was a student of Sanskrit College, he and his friends brought out *Jagriti*, both handwritten and printed. In 1935, he joined *Mithila Mihir* as its fifth editor and eventually took this premier magazine to a great height. Even as he remained its editor till 1954, he brought out a monthly magazine himself, in 1948, by the name *Swadesh*, which continued till 1955. His love for the cause of Maithili saw him establishing a press at his residence in 1948. The Mithila Press, as it was called, brought out a large number of important books. He had also the distinction of being the first person who tried bringing out a daily in Maithili.

Surendra Jha is also remembered by his pupils as an extremely conscientious teacher. At first, he taught in the Radhakant Middle School, established by his father, and



With his only son

later in an English High School in Muzaffarpur in 1934. In 1953, he joined the C.N. Mithila College at Darbhanga and was appointed the Head of the Department of Maithili in 1965. The next year he joined the L. N. Mithila University as a senior Post-Graduate Faculty, a position which he held till 1975.

His career as a Maithili writer actually began with *Mithilanka*, the special numbers of the Maithili journal *Mithila Mihir* of which he was the then editor. He had already been writing patriotic songs in Hindi with Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, and short stories like 'Jhopri' in the style of Premchand.

Among his numerous works, *Archana* is a powerful exposition of his devotion to the Muses. *Pratipada* reveals his resolution to update his literary art step by step as a journalist. *Saon-Bhadav* depicts the rainy season of Mithila – the land of frequent floods – with all its phases and colours.

Payasvini, an outstanding work of his middle life, was the most applauded Maithili book of the nineteen-fifties. It documents that fervent spirit which comes as an influx to give contemporary ideas and thoughts a primordial emotive shape and with its impact on the readers' consciousness, it takes them out of current mores in such a way that contemporaneity becomes a continuum. Later on *Payasvini* won him the Sahitya Akademi Award.

Among his later works, the Khanda-kavya *Uttara* made people name him the second Vidyapati. *Dattavati*, his *magnum opus*, is an epic which made

scholars place him in the category of a *Mahakavi*. This *Mahakavya* is based on a simple story from the *Kathasaritsagara*, but its inimitable presentation forms a semiotic triangle. It makes explicit the well-known Napoleonic philosophy of life summed up in the dictum "plaisiv, moi ne desirer pas; souhait complet, developpemente la mon pouvoir" (I do not want pleasure or happiness; only the fullest progression of all the faculties bestowed upon me.) This epic presents Mithila as a mini-India, 'Laghupratima' of Bharat.

After the publication of his two Maithili novels recently and the completion of his book of political treatise in Sanskrit, the *Pracetas Rajshastra*, based entirely on excerpts from the *Ramayana* of Valmiki (being published by Sahitya Akademi) this doyen of Maithili literature is at present – at the ripe old age of eighty five plus – engaged in writing Maithili short stories in the spirit of his earlier narrative poems like *Sanesa* and *Katha-yuthika*.

Suman is also recognized as one of the most productive translators into Maithili, and is credited to have translated a large number of works of Tagore.

Suman has been honoured with numerous prizes, awards and distinctions. It began with his recognition as an essayist in 1928 and with the Vidyapati Award of the Maithili Sahitya Parishad in 1934. Apart from the Akademi Award, he was honoured for his contribution to the national language in 1979 by the Government of Bihar. In 1982 he got the Maithili Academy Award for his *Uttara*.

The popularity of Suman can also be gauged from the fact that



With Members of Parliament, Sri Kunwar Ali Khan and Sri Harsha Deva Malaviya

he was elected to the Bihar Assembly from the Darbhanga constituency in 1972 and to the Parliament in 1977, by a large margin of votes. He was also a member of the Official Languages Committee and was an adviser of the committees on Education, Culture and Social Welfare.

To sum up, Suman is a complete man with a multi-faceted personality, who has set a model for young writers to follow.

A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Receiving felicitation volume from Baba Nagarjuna 'yatri'



With his wife

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UTTARA, 1980

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RABINDRA NATAKAVALI (TWO VOLUMES), 1993

RABINDRA NIBANDHAVALI (TWO VOLUMES), 1994



A CHRONOLOGY

1910 : Born at Ballipur in Samastipur district, Bihar

1930 : Married with Ganga Devi

1932 : Topped in Sahityacharya Examination

1935 : Joined the *Mithila-Mihir*, representative Maithili journal

1953 : Lecturer in Maithili, C. M. College, Darbhanga

1955 : Published first Maithili daily, *Swadesh*

1966 : Joined L. N. Mithila University, Darbhanga, as a Senior Post Graduate Faculty

1971 : Sahitya Akademi Award for *Payasvini*

1972 : Member, Bihar Legislative Assembly

1972 : Head, Department of Maithili, L.N. Mithila University, Darbhanga

1973 : President, All India Maithili Sahitya Parishad

1977 : Member, the sixth Lok Sabha

1982 : Vidyapati award for *Uttara*

1983 : Member, Executive Board and Convener, Maithili Language Advisory Board of Sahitya Akademi

1984 : Address at the Oriya Writers' Conference in Cuttack

1994 : Felicitation Volume on Suman.

Sketch by Kajal Kanjilal